

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 H-03 CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-11 NSAE-00

PA-04 RSC-01 USIA-15 PRS-01 SP-03 DRC-01 /054 W

----- 001541

R 080600Z AUG 74

FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3835

C O N F I D E N T I A L CANBERRA 5157

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, AS

SUBJECT: SIX BILLS PASSED BY JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT

REF: CANBERRA 5092

1. JOINT SITTING OF AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HELD AUG 6 AND 7, AT WHICH ALL SIX BILLS WHICH WERE SUBJECT OF DOUBLE DISSOLUTION IN APRIL WERE PASSED. THREE ELEC-TORAL BILLS WERE PASSED ON AUG 6 AND SIGNED AND PROMUL-GATED BY GOVERNOR GENERAL ON AUG 7. TWO HEALTH BILLS AND PETROLEUM AND MINERALS AUTHORITY BILL PASSED ON AUG 7 AND WILL PROBABLY BE SIGNED AND PROMULGATED AUG 8.

2. THIS COMPLETES PARLIAMENTARY PHASE OF CONSIDERATION OF THESE SIX BILLS, WHICH HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN REJECTED THREE TIMES BY SENATE. HOWEVER, THERE IS EVERY PROS-PECT THAT SOME OR ALL OF THESE BILLS WILL BE CHALLENGED IN HIGH COURT IN NEAR FUTURE, AND IT IS UNCERTAIN WHAT EFFECT THEY WILL HAVE IN THEIR RESPECTIVE FIELDS. OPPOSITION HAS ALSO THREATENED TO BLOCK ENABLING LEGIS-LATION WHICH WILL BE REQUIRED FOR MOST OF THESE BILLS.

3. VOTING, FOR MOST PART, WAS ON PARTY LINES. LABOR HAS 95 MEMBERS OF HOUSE AND SENATE, WHILE LIBERAL-COUNTRY OPPOSITION HAS BASIC 90 MEMBERS, AND THERE ARE TWO INDE-PENDENT SENATORS. HOWEVER, ON THREE ELECTORAL BILLS SENATOR STEELE HALL (LIBERAL MOVEMENT, SOUTH AUSTRALIA)

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VOTED WITH LABOR GOVERNMENT, WHILE SENATOR MICHAEL

TOWNLEY (INDEPENDENT, TASMANIA) VOTED WITH OPPOSITION. ON BILL TO PROVIDE SENATE REPRESENTATION (TWO SEATS EACH) FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY AND AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY, SAM CALDER (MHR, COUNTRY PARTY, NORTHERN TERRITORY) VOTED WITH LABOR PARTY. ON TWO HEALTH BILLS SENATORS HALL AND TOWNLEY VOTED WITH OPPOSITION, WHOSE RANKS GENERALLY HELD FIRM. ON PETROLEUM AND MINERALS AUTHORITY BILL TWO INDEPENDENT SENATORS ALSO VOTED WITH OPPOSITION, BUT FORMER LIBERAL PRIME MINISTER GORTON (LONG KNOWN TO FAVOR THIS BILL) WAS NOT PRESENT IN CHAMBER AND SO DID NOT VOTE.

4. COMMENT: SINCE THESE SIX BILLS HAD BEEN BEFORE PARLIAMENT THREE TIMES, NO NEW ARGUMENTS PRESENTED IN DEBATE. HOWEVER, ALL CONCERNED REMARKED ON NOVELTY AND SOLEMNITY OF OCCASION, AND DEBATE WAS SURPRISINGLY ANIMATED AND, AT TIMES, EMOTIONAL. SOME OPPOSITION SPEAKERS NOTED UNREALITY OF JOINT SITTING WHEN GOA SHOULD BE FOCUSING UPON ECONOMIC CRISIS. THEY NOTED CURRENT RASH OF STRIKES AND POSSIBILITY THAT SOME MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT WILL NOT BE ABLE TO RETURN HOME AUG 8 DUE TO CURRENT TRANSPORT AND PETROLEUM STRIKE.
HARROP

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: LAW, PETROLEUM, HEALTH, CENTRAL LEGISLATURE, MEETINGS, POLITICAL SITUATION, ELECTIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 08 AUG 1974
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: cunninfx
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1974CANBER05157
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D740216-0794
From: CANBERRA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1974/newtext/t19740865/aaaacdne.tel
Line Count: 84
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: CANBERRA 5092
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: cunninfx
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 08 JUL 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <08 JUL 2002 by shawdg>; APPROVED <27 FEB 2003 by cunninfx>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SIX BILLS PASSED BY JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT
TAGS: PINT, AS
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005